

Building Better Futures:

5 Policy Principles for Equitable College and Career Advising and Pathways

Every learner deserves access to high-quality pathways. From elementary school through high school, students should have access to the guidance, experiences, and opportunities they need to make informed decisions and achieve their goals.

What Are Pathways?

Pathways are intentional, supported routes that help learners explore their interests, build skills, and prepare for life after high school. In an ideal system, every learner — no matter their race, ethnicity, gender, income, language, or ability — can be equipped with the skills, knowledge, and information to confidently navigate opportunities that align with their ambitions and lead to meaningful postsecondary and career options and economic mobility. Pathways should offer students multiple entry points, chances to explore and change direction, and clear connections between learning experiences and future opportunities.

What Every Learner Deserves

All learners should have access to promising paths to postsecondary education and careers. Achieving this requires that students have the opportunity to develop meaningful relationships with adults and opportunities for belonging and connection. All learners must also have equitable access to consistent, culturally responsive, and linguistically accessible guidance, beginning no later than middle school. Students should have access to college and career navigators — such as licensed school counselors and other designated professionals — who understand learners' unique assets, needs, and interests and can remove barriers to participation and help learners choose among many high-quality, inclusive, structured experiences designed to prepare them for a future that aligns with their postsecondary aspirations.

These experiences should include:

- Career and technical education (CTE), which combines academic and technical skills with knowledge and training for the labor market, preparing students for high-skill careers and further education
- Work-based learning, such as internships, job shadowing, and apprenticeships
- Early college opportunities, including advanced coursework, Advanced Placement (AP), dual enrollment, and/or early college high schools
- Programs that lead to industry-recognized credentials, high-quality degrees, and/or personally fulfilling careers

Learners should be empowered to explore and move between pathways, as their interests and goals evolve, supported by systems that remove barriers and expand access to high-quality options that prepare them to thrive in careers that align with their desired social, economic, and personal aspirations.

WHO ARE COLLEGE AND CAREER NAVIGATORS?

College and career navigators are trusted adults who help students explore options, plan for the future, access opportunities, and successfully transition to postsecondary education and careers.

Navigators may include licensed school counselors, college and community college advisers, college access program staff, and other trained professionals who provide timely, culturally responsive, and actionable guidance.

What matters most is not a person's title, but whether students have consistent access to individuals who can:

- Affirm that every student can thrive and ensure that race, income, or background never defines the opportunities they are encouraged to pursue
- Build strong, sustained relationships with students and families
- Model behavioral and character traits that students may aspire to develop
- Help students understand their options and make informed decisions
- Connect students to academic, career-connected, and postsecondary opportunities
- Coordinate supports and help students navigate transitions across school, postsecondary, and workforce systems

Current Challenges

There are too few school counselors. The average student-to-school counselor ratio is well above the American School Counselor Association's recommendation for effective counseling (372:1 compared to 250:1). This disparity is even greater in schools serving more students of color and students from low-income backgrounds, largely due to both funding and personnel shortages.

School counselors are overburdened. School counselors most often cite role confusion and being assigned inappropriate duties as barriers limiting their time for direct student services, including college and career advising. Activities such as coordinating 504 plans and testing, substitute teaching, and handling discipline may prevent them from spending more time delivering a comprehensive school counseling program.

School counselors lack training to support student college and career navigation. Many school counseling graduate programs do not include a dedicated course on college and career advising, leaving school counselors without formal preparation to support students in navigating college and career pathways. Professional development often does not fill this gap either, as it is [frequently disconnected from the actual roles school counselors are asked to fill](#). College and career navigation specific training programs that do exist [tend to be offered as one-off, stand-alone training](#) rather than integrated into ongoing professional development.

Funding is inequitable. States [distribute fewer public education funds](#) to schools that serve high percentages of students of color. This hinders schools' ability to staff school counselors, provide career exploration activities, recruit industry professionals to teach CTE classes, and offer high-quality career-connected learning opportunities that lead to desired careers.

Navigation is fragmented across systems. While community colleges and college access programs often provide valuable advising and support, access to these services is uneven and not guaranteed. Students must often find and navigate these supports on their own, leading to gaps in guidance — particularly during key transitions such as dual enrollment and the transition out of high school.

Not all students have the same opportunities to succeed. Students of color, students with disabilities, and those from low-income backgrounds have less access to internships, career-focused courses, and advanced or college-credit courses, due to resource inequities and placement policies that systematically overlook certain student groups. For example, a student might not be able to afford to participate in opportunities if costs aren't standardized statewide, or if there are few advanced coursework or career-connected learning opportunities in their area. While there are notable bright spots across the country, far too many students still lack access to the guidance and opportunities they need to access promising pathways and succeed after high school.

Policy Solutions

Too often, access to college and career counseling and advising depends on a student's zip code, race, or income level. Policymakers have a crucial role to play in creating a more just and inclusive system in which every student receives the guidance and support needed to explore their interests, understand their options, and make informed decisions about their future. This includes addressing widespread gaps in access to state-licensed school counselors and other college and career navigators, ensuring that all students — especially those who have been historically underserved — can navigate pathways that lead to meaningful, rewarding careers.

Federal investment, guidance, technical assistance, and leadership are essential. Without them, students will continue to face inequities in access to college and career advising and postsecondary opportunities, and certain student groups will lack the necessary support to access high-quality pathways that lead to college and career success.

Providing students with robust options for postsecondary success will require cross-sector collaboration, including support from families, school staff, district leaders, community-based organizations (CBOs), and industry partners. Success will require policymakers to adhere to five key principles:

1. Connect and Strengthen Federal and State Data Systems
2. Equitably Fund School Counseling and Career Advising and Strengthen Pipelines to Ensure Equitable Access for Every Learner
3. Support and Expand Research on Evidence-Based Advising Practices
4. Foster Partnerships Between K-12, Higher Education, CBOs, and Industry
5. Center Trusted Navigators and Produce Equitable Guardrails for Technology/AI

PRINCIPLE 1: Connect and Strengthen Federal and State Data Systems

Federal and state policymakers must ensure that students, families, and the programs and adults who support them have access to clear, relevant, and user-friendly data. This information should empower students to make informed choices and enable school counselors and navigators to connect them with meaningful opportunities that reflect both their aspirations and workforce needs.

Currently, most states lack a coherent data infrastructure that connects K-12, postsecondary, and workforce systems. Consequently, stakeholders often lack a clear understanding of outcomes data, hindering learners' ability to make informed choices and impeding efforts to improve systems and hold them accountable. Where data does exist, it is often inaccessible to the public.

States should consider building data systems that connect milestones across the K-12 and postsecondary continuum, such as on-track and graduation rates, enrollment in advanced coursework and dual enrollment, college enrollment and persistence, and completion, disaggregated by race, ethnicity, and gender. Timely, disaggregated, and transparent outcomes data can reveal where access and participation gaps exist and whether historically underserved students are enrolling in high-quality pathways at the same rate as their peers, and whether those pathways lead to persistence and completion. Labor data including industry and occupational employment projections should also be connected to or embedded as a part of such data systems.

Policymakers must prioritize data systems that drive continuous improvement and hold systems accountable for delivering on the promise of opportunity for all. Achieving this requires interconnected systems and shared understandings of the essential data needed to track outcomes.

PRINCIPLE 2: Equitably Fund School Counseling and Career Advising and Strengthen Pipelines to Ensure Equitable Access for Every Learner

High-quality college and career advising should be a fundamental part of every student's educational experience, not a privilege available only in well-resourced communities. Policymakers must actively support efforts to address the challenges schools face in providing adequate college and career advising. This requires increased investments in staffing and training, both within schools and through community-based partnerships with expertise in engaging and mentoring underserved youth. These efforts should also include understanding the root causes and scale of these challenges and implementing targeted solutions to ensure all students have the guidance they need to succeed.

In addition to increasing staffing levels, existing school counselors and support personnel need ongoing professional learning opportunities that connect them to resources and strengthen their ability to guide students through career exploration, high-quality work-based learning, preparation for in-demand careers, and postsecondary planning. These investments are essential for ensuring that historically underserved students can access the education, training, and family-sustaining careers they deserve.

Advisors and school counselors should also be equipped and supported to build strong relationships with families, as robust family engagement is a critical part of helping students navigate college and career decisions. This engagement should be culturally relevant and accessible, including offering materials and communication in multiple languages, at times and through modalities that work for families' schedules and preferences, and reflecting the diverse structures and experiences of the families they serve.

PRINCIPLE 3: Support and Expand Research on Evidence-Based Advising Practices

To ensure the college and career readiness field uses the most effective and equitable college and career advising and navigation strategies, policymakers must facilitate and invest in research and the scaling of best practices. These efforts will empower students to make informed choices and successfully navigate their pathways to success. Policymakers must also prioritize the creation of resources and tools that enable navigators to provide evidence-based, equitable, high-quality guidance to all students.

This should include longitudinal studies that track the long-term, disaggregated outcomes of students participating in college and career readiness programs, so policymakers, educators, and advocates can gain invaluable insights into programs' strengths and areas for improvement. The findings from this research should be used to inform future policy decisions and ensure that college and career advising programs are aligned with evolving workforce and higher education needs. States can also develop evidence-based frameworks that guide when and how career exploration is introduced during learners' educational journeys.

PRINCIPLE 4: Foster Partnerships Between K-12, Higher Education, CBOs, and Industry

Policymakers must foster and support partnerships between local education agencies (LEAs), colleges, universities, community-based organizations, and industry to ensure seamless transitions for all students from high school to postsecondary education and the workforce. These policies should strengthen access to high-quality work-based learning opportunities, especially for historically underserved students.

Partnerships across the education sector, community-based organizations, and industry can allow students to obtain real-world learning experiences and take early college courses that will better prepare them for their future careers. Moreover, such efforts can help ensure that school counselors and navigators deeply understand the needs and opportunities in their states and communities, and that students and families have access to information and supports to take advantage of opportunities.

Colleges and universities should be accountable partners throughout students' educational journeys — not merely endpoints after high school. Higher education institutions should collaborate with K-12 schools, CBOs, and employers to provide postsecondary advising, financial aid navigation, and transition support while working to reduce barriers, including but not limited to structures related to remediation and credit transfer.

PRINCIPLE 5: Center Trusted Navigators, Understand and Produce Equitable Guardrails for Technology/AI

Policymakers should ensure that advising remains grounded in trusted relationships between students and adults who hold high expectations for them. Technology, including AI, should support counselors in strengthening these relationships, not substitute or replace them.

Policymakers should support the responsible development and use of technology that empowers school counselors to better support students through their college and career readiness journeys. They should also explore how emerging technologies, including AI, can help school counselors provide more personalized and timely guidance while ensuring every student receives the support they need to make informed postsecondary and career decisions.

At the same time, policymakers should provide guidance and guardrails on AI use, as widespread adoption of AI, like any transformative technology, could have [unintended consequences](#) and pose potential dangers for students — especially students of color, students from low-income backgrounds, and students with disabilities. Given these demonstrated risks, policymakers must formulate policies and practices for AI use in classrooms that prioritize accessibility and mitigate bias, and require vendors to prove that their tools do not exacerbate inequities faced by underserved students. Policymakers should also address the digital divide in rural communities, communities of color, and socioeconomically disadvantaged communities to ensure that all students have fair access to high-quality AI technology tools.

Conclusion

Our nation has the opportunity and the responsibility to ensure that every learner has access to the guidance, experiences, and support they need to thrive. Every student deserves the chance to explore pathways that are meaningful to them. At a time when political divisions run deep, one priority continues to unite leaders across the political spectrum: preparing young people for an evolving workforce.

While notable efforts to support learners to prepare for their future are underway across the country, more action is needed. States and local districts cannot do this work alone. Lasting progress demands bold, sustained leadership, investment, and collaboration at the federal, state, and local levels and across sectors.

Every learner — regardless of race, income, ability, or zip code — deserves the opportunity to discover and pursue a path that reflects their interests and talents and leads to a fulfilling life. Investing in robust, student-centered advising is more than an educational priority; it's a national imperative. The strength of our economy, the resilience of our democracy, and our collective future depend on ensuring that the next generation has the opportunity and support to reach their full potential and successfully navigate a changing world.

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